Lake Michigan Beach Forecast Season Begins May 24th

The National Weather Service Chicago Office will resume issuing Surfzone forecasts for the shoreline of Lake and Cook Counties in Illinois and Lake and Porter Counties in Indiana for the summer 2013 swim season beginning Friday May 24th.

New for this Year:

Beach Hazard Statements

Beach Hazard Statements will be issued over the summer on days when dangerous swimming conditions are expected. The Beach Hazard Statement addresses various beach hazards and replaces the Rip Current Statements that have been issued in past years. See the Service Change Notice at: www.nws.noaa.gov/om/notification/scn13-33BHS_expansion.htm for more details on this transition.

Swim Hazard Risk Replaces Rip Current Risk in the Surfzone Forecast:

Part of the transition to Beach Hazard Statements will include the Surfzone Forecast. The Surfzone Forecast will no longer refer to Rip Current Risk, but instead Low, Moderate and High Swim Hazard Risk.

Factors Contributing to Dangerous Swimming Conditions

High Waves

High waves pose several dangers to swimmers at Lake Michigan beaches. First, high waves will cause swimmers to become fatigued. Large waves are very powerful and can push a person off a sandbar and into deeper water, requiring them to swim through a rapid succession of waves to get back to more shallow water.

Rip Currents and Structural Currents

Also, high waves result in dangerous rip currents and structural currents. Rip currents are strong, fast moving channels of water that form rapidly and flow quickly away from shore through breaks or low spots in the sandbar. Structural currents are strong, fast moving currents which frequently flow along piers, breakwalls and jetties toward deeper water offshore.

Strong Offshore Winds

Dangerous swim conditions can also develop with strong offshore winds. Although wave heights would tend to be lower with offshore winds, strong winds can still cause dangerous structural currents in the Chicago area. Southerly winds over 35 mph resulted in dangerous currents near a

pier at Loyola Park Beach on May 24, 2012, a contributing factor in the tragic drowning of a 15 year old female.

Furthermore, particularly at the Indiana Dunes beaches, strong southerly winds pose a unique hazards to those on rafts. These winds can create a current that pulls rafts well away from shore into deeper water. A 31 year old male drowned on June 18, 2012 at Lake View Beach in Beverly Shores when his raft capsized and blew away from him after drifting over a quarter mile from shore due to 30 mph southerly winds. The chief ranger at the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore also reported that there were several rescues in summer 2012 alone due to rafts being drifted well offshore.

Criteria for Issuance of Beach Hazard Statements

NWS Chicago will issue a Beach Hazard Statement when there is a high swim hazard risk to either of the following:

1) High waves of at least 3 to 5 feet and dangerous currents.
2) Winds of 30 mph or higher and dangerous currents.

We will no longer be issuing statements for a moderate risk, but a moderate risk will be highlighted in the Surfzone forecast.

People heading to Lake Michigan beaches this summer should:

1) Check www.weather.gov/chicago or NOAA Weather Radio to see if any Beach Hazard Statements are in effect, and if they are, plan to stay out of the water that day.
2) Swim on lifeguarded beaches when possible.
3) Refer to warning flags at local beaches for the latest information before going into Lake Michigan waters.
   Flag Definitions: Green: OK to swim; Yellow: Caution is urged; Red: Hazardous to swim

Swimming at Lake Michigan beaches is a wonderful part of living in or visiting this area, but on days when waves are high and/or currents are strong, it is a very dangerous activity and one that should be postponed until the hazardous conditions subside. Please stay informed and safe this summer, and enjoy the beaches!

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